

Dek Unu Magazine

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Hause Spiele

Natali Agryzkova





Cover: ©Natali Agryzkova

This photograph inspired the idea to create a project about forced emigration. This period is difficult for everyone—you begin life from scratch in a foreign country, while your heart aches for loved ones in Ukraine, and you long for home. It feels as though you're constantly being pulled into the uncertainty of the future. You wake up with this feeling, and you fall asleep with it. As in the lines of Lina Kostenko:

And again, the night. And again, the silence. / And again, I'm alone. / And again, the foreign city breathes, and in my heart – emptiness.



The sun also rises over unfamiliar fields.



As in all the photographs of the project, here too, my daughter and I wanted to convey the feeling of dissolving into space—into an apartment slowly filling with furniture. As if out of despair, you begin to adapt, to adjust to what is "not yours." And this life in a foreign country inevitably absorbs you, year after year. We become a part of the place where we were "placed."



We are like sketches on someone else's paper: still unclear, but already a part of this space.



Here, among empty walls, we search for familiar forms, trying to feel at home.



Stability is a fabricated illusion. But in this fragility, you find strength—you learn to maintain balance, even when life turns upside down.



Adaptation is like playing in a dollhouse—as if nothing is real.



It has always been important and meaningful for me to welcome friends and family into my home in Ukraine. I miss this deeply here.



We learn to hide our anxiety with anything we can find.



During our first year in Germany, my daughter asked me almost every day, "When are we going home?" It felt like a dialogue with a ghost. No one can answer that question even now.



It has already been three years since we came to Germany, but there are still days when I just want to put on the coat I wore when we left our home and return to the life we once had.



Artist Interview - Natali Agryzkova

North Americans can't begin to imagine life under invasion or forced emigration. What has happened to you?

The sound of war is the most terrifying thing a person can hear. I witnessed the outbreak of war while I was in the hospital with my daughter—she had fallen seriously ill and was in intensive care. Around 4:30 a.m., the hospital was shaken by loud explosions and the roar of airplanes overhead.



Natali Agrzykova

Everyone started calling loved ones, trying to understand what was happening, since there was nothing yet on the news. Only by six in the morning was it officially announced: war had begun. It was chaotic, frightening, and heartbreaking. Nothing can prepare you for that moment.

After we spent two weeks sheltering in the basement—Mykolaiv was heavily bombarded in the first year—my husband insisted that I take the children to friends of ours in

Hamburg. I am deeply grateful to that family for helping us during those first difficult months. And of course, I'm thankful to Germany for supporting us with language courses, help finding housing and work, and providing both financial and social assistance.

Let's start at the beginning. What kind of kid were you? Early artist? Class clown? Serious achiever?

I was born in the southern city of Mykolaiv, and I've always been a child of the sun, naturally drawn to creativity. At school, I constantly created visual presentations, drew endlessly, played sports, and read art books. There's even a note in my school records that I spent more time reading than studying actual subjects.

Very few of us had "artist-photographer" as an original career destination. What was your original plan? How did all that change?

My life has been full of twists and changes. I deeply regret not standing firm in my decision to pursue an artistic career—I ended up studying economics instead. I worked in government administration, later opened a clothing store, and even led pole sport classes as a coach. I explored many directions, but after the birth of my second child, I started to delve into photography. I started using the camera to capture everyday life—my children, our family moments, simple memories from a mother's perspective. Then I began doing commercial shoots, mostly portraits of women.

The turning point came when I began studying conceptual and art photography with Sergey Melnitchenko. That experience opened up an entire universe of artistic discovery for me. Melnitchenko is a truly brilliant person

with incredibly powerful energy. I have no idea how he manages to do so much on such a large scale. He not only offers in-depth photography education but also he continues to work on his own personal projects, which are sought after by collectors and galleries. He organizes strong exhibitions all over the world and represents Ukrainian photographers internationally. For the last three years, without a break, he's been deeply involved in volunteer work—not just fundraising for the Ukrainian Armed Forces, but often personally delivering equipment to active war zones. He is, without a doubt, a powerful example to me of dedication and deep inner strength.

Was there a particular photo that you made early on that surprised you? That persuaded you to get serious?

At the end of the MYPH course, we had to present a project, but I struggled to find a subject I truly wanted to share with the world. Then, by accident, I took the photo that marked a turning point for me. I was photographing a girl in the studio who kept trying on different personas—playing roles. As she was changing clothes, for just a brief second, she let go, and I saw something raw and real in her. I captured that moment, and it became part of my first project, *Pristine*. The series explores a woman's authenticity—those fleeting seconds before she puts on the social masks the world expects of her.

MYPH enjoys an international reputation as a school for fine art photography. Sounds like a perfect fit for you.

MYPH is more than just a place to learn conceptual photography—it's like a second family. Being part of this community means you're not alone in a crowded field. We constantly support each other, give feedback, share calls for

entries and art opportunities, organize exhibitions across the world, and have published two amazing photography books in the past couple of years. Some of the artists from MYPH have become my closest friends.



My training at MYPH was purely conceptual—it was about discovering myself as an artist, not preparing for a commercial path. That said, if your art is published, exhibited, and sometimes purchased, it naturally overlaps with the commercial world. I don't believe that only a starving artist is a true genius! If collectors are buying your work, that's powerful motivation to keep creating.

What's it like to work with your daughter? For you? For her? Is she patient? Are you?

Before the *Hause Spiele* series, I did a project with my oldest son called *Debut*, centered around chess. It was shown in many places. So when I started working on a project with my daughter, she was thrilled! Now they're in competition—who has more portraits in exhibitions? But honestly, photographing kids isn't easy. They get thirsty, hungry, distracted... things can go sideways quickly! But that's also what makes it magical—

the improvisation, the honesty. I always try to follow a plan, but I'm secretly waiting for that unexpected moment of beauty that only kids can create. Their openness brings a kind of harmony to the image.

Striving for originality invites failure, usually repeated failures. How do you know when it's finally "art."

I am incredibly self-critical. I wish I could be more forgiving with myself, but usually it's the opposite. I'll shoot for as long as it takes to get the image I'm after—even with kids, I won't stop until something feels right. My children are very patient with me, luckily! I actually have a few projects that are strong conceptually but never made it past my internal critic, so they're still sitting in a drawer, waiting for me to return to them. Someday I'll shoot them the way I envision.

Beethoven is rumored to have poured ice-water on his head to stimulate creativity. What helps you? Quiet? Music? Tequila?

Tequila? Maybe I should try that! Honestly, I know many photographers who work intuitively, shooting first and building the concept later. I kind of envy them. I'm the opposite: I usually spend a lot of time developing the concept—living with it, thinking about it, sketching and writing it down—before I even touch the camera. Lately, though, I've been trying to loosen up by doing more street photography, especially on film. I love the unpredictability—you don't know what you'll get until it's developed. It's helped me embrace spontaneity and let go of control.

Creatives sometimes provide energy and inspiration to each other. Are you part of a gang with whom you can share?

I'm lucky that my friend and fellow MYPH photographer Xenia Petrovska also lives in Hamburg, it's important to have that

kind of connection nearby. Xenia was the one who taught me how to work with film, and honestly, I now shoot more on film than on digital. She has a truly unique style when it comes to street photography, her eye for subtle details transforms everyday scenes into something abstract. Her recent work is connected to the idea of home in Ukraine, and it's an incredibly touching project. Each image she creates brings back memories of our streets, our homes, our daily life, and traditions.



From *Pristine*

I stay in touch with others from Ukraine. Artem Humilevskiy inspires me with his incredible work and the way he employs his own body in his projects—so sensitive and deeply personal. Veronica Mol taught me how to work with and love Polaroid. Her Polaroids are experimental, profound, and vulnerable. Artem and Veronica are the founders of *MYPH Assistance*, an initiative that supports MYPH collective in developing their careers.

What kind of place is Hamburg for you, as an artist? As an expat?

As for Hamburg itself—I have mixed feelings. I love the architecture, the people, and the number of galleries and art spaces. But I do wish the sun would come out more often—it's often grey and rainy, which makes the mood a bit melancholic.

This image, from the series focused on your son, is a complex, multi-layered visual metaphor. Take us through it?



From Debut

My son has been playing chess since he was four years old. Constant hours of training and championships have caused him to have long uncontrolled conversations while sleeping. Sometimes, in dreams, one can hear the flow of the chess game, and sometimes it is an internal cry of a losing player. There are also absurd stories through a dream, you can only guess the plot or try to imagine what really happens on a subconscious level through elusive dreams. This illusion is difficult to describe in words, so you can only try to show it through the lens.

There are so many options of development of the events in the world and it can be very well traced on a chessboard. After three moves on each side, more than nine million possible positions appear. In the world of the subconscious the boundaries are erased, you become the part of something unconscious and uncontrollable, where the player can suddenly become a figure and his path will be a square on a chessboard.

Paul Gauguin said, "I close my eyes to see." Throughout the project, my son's eyes remain closed—until the very last frame, where he opens them. This serves as a symbolic gesture: a visual representation of the dream state where his "chess conversations" take place, and the transition toward waking. The subconscious is a world always close by—vast and unfathomable in its depth. To access and understand it, we each need our own key—a personal way of opening the door. The threshold between waking and dreaming is where the subconscious reveals itself. It's like slipping into water, but not fully submerging—just enough to allow a connection between the two states. That's why water became the guiding element in this photographic series, helping to express and evoke the essence of the subconscious mind.

Talk about the critical response to your work, formal, informal, professional, civilian.

Last year, I took part in a portfolio review organized by *Freundeskreis Photographie* in Hamburg. It was fascinating to hear how German curators interpreted my project—what stood out to them, what questions it raised. It gave me a new perspective on my own work,

Many have mixed emotions about formal reviews. How did it go for you?

It was a very intense day. It started with a brief introduction to all the participants, followed by a one-on-one portfolio review, and then a public presentation of myself and my work. One of the reviewers was from the *Pinakothek der Moderne* museum. She gave me feedback on *Hause Spiele*: the composition of the project, the strongest and most powerful images, and suggested removing a few weaker ones from the project I presented. That part was especially emotional because you're constantly engaging with a large flow of people—

from artists and photographers to curators, gallerists, and representatives from publishing houses.

After the award for best portfolio was announced, there was a curatorial tour of the exhibition at *PHoxxi*. In the evening, there was a presentation by the five “Futures Talents 2024” photographers. And to end the day, a one-hour panel discussion on “The Future of Institutional Funding, New Opportunities, and How to Use Them.” In all, it a day full of both emotional and informational intensity.

As a critic, what do you look for in new art you encounter?

I’m drawn to work that feels emotionally honest and layered.

You have been a pro since 2017. How is commercial work in Germany different from Ukraine?

I can't really comment about commercial work in Germany, since I'm just starting to develop that part of my career myself. Compared to my home country, it's much harder to establish yourself here because small business is tangled up in bureaucracy, complex accounting requirements, and high taxes. That's why people here are more likely to take a job with someone else rather than start their own business.

Your conceptual work is highly original. Do you have a "brand" — a philosophy or style that distinguishes your commercial work from the others?

For me, it's essential to connect with the stories of the people I photograph—their lives, their interests. People are so incredibly unique. I don't really know how to do the whole “stand here, put your leg or arm like that” kind of shooting. My

sessions are often just honest conversations during a walk, and in between, there are moments that naturally happen—moments that later remain as memories through photos or video.



During the pandemic, I paused most of my commercial work and focused purely on conceptual photography. I got deeply into psychology, which inspired me to create more introspective, layered projects. But then the war began, and my studies took a back seat. Now that I'm in Hamburg, I've just started taking on client work again, mostly with Ukrainian women. At the same time, I'm continuing to develop my artistic practice and explore contemporary art more deeply.

What about your gear? Is there anything that's indispensable?

I keep things pretty simple—my go-to is the Canon R6, along with a film camera and a Polaroid. I don't use a lot of gear. For

me, it's more about the idea and the connection than the technical setup.

Is there a place for A.I. in your practice?

I don't use it in my art, but I do talk to it a lot—as if it's a super-knowledgeable virtual friend. I ask it questions all the time. It's kind, helpful... until things go off the rails!

Does "finished" mean "posted?" Or "printed?"

Sometimes a well-targeted Instagram post can bring in more clients than word of mouth. But I'll admit—managing social media is always a challenge for me. It's just not my strong suit.

I usually print for specific events—exhibitions, sales, portfolio reviews—because it's not exactly a cheap process. But nothing compares to seeing your work printed. The texture of the paper, the richness of the colors—these things matter. A physical print lets you see the work in a completely different way.

Thanks so much, Natali! What's next? A new project underway. Plans for shows? A book? Anything we can help you advertise?

I'm in a phase now where I'm looking for new ways to use photography, currently working on several projects that push beyond traditional techniques. I'm experimenting with mixed media—collage, Polaroid emulsion, clay, even textiles—anything that can help express my ideas more viscerally. I'm experimenting with blending different materials with photographic prints, allowing myself to dive deeper into more autobiographical stories. I'm also dreaming of developing a photo book in the near future—one that truly creates a sense of closeness between the images and the viewer.

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